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Lot and His God

Howard Barker

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“I came to the city. I saw the people were filthy. And those who were not filthy were still filthy. The filth of those who were not filthy was not in their acts or even in their thoughts but in their permission, for permission is filthy if the thing permitted is filthy.”

So begins Howard Barker’s reimagining of the situation in Sodom when God sent two angels to escort Lot and his family from the city before destroying it. It is set in a dirty café with slovenly staff where the speaker is meeting Lot’s wife. Barker calls her Drogheda, her Sverdlosk.

Drogheda means “bridge over the ford” so as a connector, a messenger, perhaps it’s appropriate, for it turns out that he is an angel, but Sverdlosk? Is it an anagram? Since no-one actually calls her by name perhaps it isn’t significant, but Barker is a writer who rarely does anything lightly so one looks for all possible clues to understanding.

We seem set up for an attack on permissiveness and perhaps that is an element of what he is exploring in this play, for Lot seems extremely tolerant of his wife’s infidelity. In the Bible at one point, Lot pretends she is his sister so that so that people in Egypt who fancy her don’t feel they have to bump him off first, and he is also the guy who offers his two youngest, still-virgin daughters for the pleasure of the men folk of Sodom. But hey! Lot is supposed to be the good guy, presumably such treatment of women was perfectly OK according to early Jewish mores.

However, Barker is not retelling the Bible story. He is as interested in what effect a self-possessed elegant woman can have on a rather grubby looking angel and her attraction to him. She is a woman who doesn’t accept being told what to do. He is a hot-tempered angel who blinds those who displease him and now, excited by the idea of sin, wants to explore sensual, sexual diversions. While he is distracted from his duties, God has to find another person to act as his mouthpiece.

Mr Drogheda seems to be an angel who makes his own judgements and though the play sends Lot and Sverdlosk off out of Sodom perhaps he has already impregnated her with a knowledge of what is to come.

Barker’s heightened way of writing sounds good when spoken by actors and Robyn Winford-Smith’s direction brings out the inherent theatricality of this hour-long play. Hermione Gulliford, immaculate in purple from her high heels and beautifully cut suit to her wittily perched hat, is an elegant Sverdlosk, with a pristine, rather voluptuous sensuality.

Justin Avoth is a wonderfully grubby angel, the contrast could hardly be greater. Lot becomes the aloof intellectual and Mark Tandy suggests both the careful observer and the attraction that ensures his wife’s love despite infidelities and Vincent Enderby, struck sightless and mute as the waiter, expressively crawls between them.

What is it really about? Worrying about that can wait until after it is over. It is enough to sit enjoying these strong performances and Fotini Dimou's atmospheric setting, all outworn lino, tired metal tables, smoke blackened window and flickering old light fittings, all helped by Peter Mumford's lighting as Sodom burns outside.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)